

Uzbekistan's View of Security in Afghanistan After 2014

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MUCH OF THE recent focus on Uzbekistan in relation to Afghanistan has been on the Northern Distribution Network, which the United States uses for two main purposes: to transport nonlethal supplies through Central Asia to troops in Afghanistan and for the New Silk Road economic projects to develop Afghanistan and the region over the next several years. The projects would improve transportation and energy links between Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and others) and Afghanistan.¹ In addition, in September 2011 the U.S. Congress decided to resume security assistance to Uzbekistan after a seven-year hiatus, reopening a debate on U.S. security interests taking priority over human rights in Uzbekistan.

Less considered is the issue of regional security, specifically Uzbekistan's view of the coming U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan. This viewpoint is difficult to capture, because it is not often directly voiced, but we can examine it through the government's previous actions on security issues.

Of the Central Asian states involved in either the Northern Distribution Network or New Silk Road projects, Uzbekistan has the strongest security forces and some power projection capability. Uzbekistan sees itself as the bulwark against terrorism and extremism among other Central Asian states. It has been the birthplace of regional extremist groups, most notably the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the Uzbek government has demonstrated in the past that it will take any necessary action to protect its interests against such groups, especially if it perceives that a border state is not taking appropriate measures.

In October 2001, Operation Enduring Freedom changed the security dynamic for Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, and in particular, the status of the IMU, which had shifted its operational focus in 2001 to Afghanistan and Pakistan, partly because of the deaths of group cofounders Juma Namangani and later Tahir Yuldashev. The IMU and related groups will most likely remain in Afghanistan in some form even after U.S. military involvement there decreases over the next few years. While the IMU mainly operated in

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PHOTO: Russian border guards observe Afghan territory controlled by the Taliban on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border near the Tajik town of Pyandzh, 18 September 2001. (AP Photo/Pool)

the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, it reportedly also carried out attacks in Afghanistan's northern regions near the Uzbek border. This region is a significant narcotics trafficking route, an additional factor for violence. This situation could lead the Uzbekistan government to take unilateral military action. Uzbekistan's viewpoint on the Afghanistan security situation is vital to understand, rather than condemn or ignore, to achieve the best possible outcome during the coming U.S. and NATO drawdown.

The IMU and Uzbekistan's "International" War on Terrorism

One of the best ways to understand how Uzbekistan views security in the region is to look at the history of its conflicts with the IMU. The IMU grew out of an Islamic movement called Adolat (an Uzbek word meaning *justice*). When small- and medium-sized businesses developed in the last years of the Soviet Union, around 1989-1990, racketeers demanded protection money from business owners, particularly in the city of Namangan in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley. The owners looked for ways to protect themselves against racketeers, and one business owner formed a protection group, Adolat, to fill that need. Within Adolat, young underground mullah Tahir Yuldashev emerged as an important leader along with one Juma Namangani, who had served in the Soviet Army in Afghanistan during the last years of the war.²

Adolat set up a vigilante group to patrol Namangan and enforce Islamic law and customs. The organization numbered a few hundred men (higher estimates put the number at a few thousand), and in December 1991, they occupied the local Communist Party headquarters. In spring 1992, Uzbekistan banned and cracked down on the movement. Both leaders and some Adolat members fled to Tajikistan, where they split up.³ Namangani became involved in the Tajik Civil War, while Yuldashev traveled to Afghanistan (and reportedly Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates) and made contacts to assist with obtaining funding and other resources.⁴

In Tajikistan, Namangani met up with Mirzo Ziyoev, an important figure in the United Tajik Opposition, and during the Tajik Civil War from 1992 to 1997, he commanded a small force that had followed him from Uzbekistan. Namangani stayed in Tajikistan, around Garm, after the civil war ended and became involved in drug trafficking. Yuldashev traveled to Tajikistan and met with Namangani in 1997, and together they formed the IMU in 1998. They declared a jihad against the government of Uzbekistan with the IMU's ultimate goal being to overthrow the government and establish an Islamic state.⁵

In 1998, the IMU started operating from a base in the Tavildara District in Tajikistan. They were linked with the 1999 Tashkent bombing (although there were conflicting reports of their involvement) and the cross-border incidents in the Batken Province, Kyrgyzstan, in 1999 and 2000.⁶ IMU fighters crossed into the Batken Province in early August 1999 and took hostages, including members of the local government, a general in Kyrgyzstan's Interior Ministry forces, and four Japanese geologists. After receiving a ransom for the Japanese hostages, the fighters left Batken, with help and some convincing from Ziyoev, and spent the winter months near Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan.

The group made its way back into Tajikistan several months later, and in August 2000, IMU fighters again crossed into Batken. During the second incursion, IMU fighters again took hostages, including four Americans, while other units simultaneously crossed into Uzbekistan in the Surkhandarya region and near the capital Tashkent. The latter groups clashed with Uzbek forces and even inflicted serious casualties on Uzbek troops, but were wiped out in turn. The IMU fighters in Kyrgyzstan withdrew in October and made their way to Afghanistan.⁷

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Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan responded to the incursions with air strikes against IMU targets in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in August 1999, but did so without notifying either government that it was conducting the strikes. Four aircraft from the Uzbek Air Force struck targets in the areas of Garm and Jirgatal, Tajikistan, in mid-August. Aircraft also struck at IMU members in Kyrgyzstan, with reported civilian casualties. The government of Kyrgyzstan apparently requested the airstrikes, but later claimed that Uzbekistan acted alone. Regardless, Uzbekistan believed the action was justified.⁸

The IMU was able to penetrate into Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan through mountain pathways that border forces could not effectively patrol or secure. As a defensive measure, Uzbekistan mined its borders with Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and Tajikistan in 2000 in the Fergana Valley region.⁹ The IMU made no more major incursions or attacks after 2000, but Uzbekistan did not start to remove the

mines until 2004-2005. An unknown number of mines are still on the border with Tajikistan and have caused casualties among the local population. Uzbekistan did not provide maps or locations of mined areas to the governments of Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰

Uzbekistan's unilateral actions during and after the incursions can be somewhat explained by tensions over resources following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The centralized management of the Soviet system gave way to each state trying to put together water and energy sharing agreements. In short, this created a climate of mistrust and suspicion among all five Central Asian governments, particularly between Uzbekistan and its eastern neighbors, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan held this outlook on security issues as well.

An incident in 1991 between Yuldashev and Uzbekistan's president (then leader of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic) Islam Karimov might

also explain the unilateral actions. In front of a large crowd in the city of Namangan, Yuldashev upstaged and undermined the president, speaking at length and gaining the crowd's support. At the time Karimov had not yet established a strong position in Uzbekistan during the transition to independence. The incident was caught on video and seen as a victory for Yuldashev. It remains a propaganda piece for the IMU.¹¹

After the February 1999 bombings, Uzbekistan did not renew its membership in the Collective Security Treaty (renamed Collective Security Treaty Organization, CSTO, in 2002). Instead, the government joined a new organization with Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Moldova, GUUAM, which had less of a security focus.¹² The Batken incursions also demonstrated the sentiment of Uzbekistan when Karimov talked about Uzbekistan's defense capabilities compared to Russia, saying that he "will teach Russia how to deal with militants."¹³ Karimov responded to what he believed was Russia trying to have a strong influence over regional governments through the Collective Security Treaty. Uzbekistan also believed that Tajikistan, and even Russian forces still in Tajikistan after the civil war, did not do enough to prevent the IMU from operating and crossing the Afghan-Tajik and Kyrgyz-Tajik borders.¹⁴

Terrorist attacks in 2004 added to Uzbekistan's anxiety. Members of an extremist group, belonging to either Hizb ut-Tahrir, the IMU, or the Islamic Jihad Union detonated bombs and attacked police in Bukhara and Tashkent in spring 2004.¹⁵ The Islamic Jihad Union also received the blame for the July 2004 bombings outside the U.S. and Israeli embassies in Tashkent.¹⁶

Uzbekistan felt especially slighted at how the West, particularly the United States, reacted to the May 2005 Andijan incident. The government of Uzbekistan saw this as another example of its battle with extremist groups, although Andijan involved the group Akromiya, not the IMU.¹⁷ The United States and Europe imposed sanctions on Uzbekistan not long after Andijan took place, although the United States had already stopped security assistance in 2004 because of human rights issues. The sanctions certainly had an effect, but also damaged the government of Uzbekistan's belief that it is united in an international war against terrorism. They see the 9/11 attacks alongside attacks in Uzbekistan as part of wider movement of terrorism.¹⁸

Other Developments

Uzbekistan rejoined the CSTO in 2006, but has limited its participation.¹⁹ It has not supported the formation or use of the CSTO's Collective Operational Reaction Force (CORF).²⁰ Uzbekistan refused to send troops to collective exercises or make them available for the CORF (sending only observers to the CSTO Rubezh 2007 exercise, the one time it participated).²¹ Uzbekistan cited potential CORF problems in responding to crisis situations, specifically, sovereignty issues if CORF deployed to a member state in response to a regional conflict. Uzbekistan demonstrated this belief during the December 2010 CSTO summit. CSTO members agreed to change the organization's mandate to respond to internal threats in a member state following the conflict in June 2010 in southern Kyrgyzstan. The CSTO did not intervene at that time because the mandate allows a collective response only if a member is threatened by an outside aggressor.²² Uzbekistan disagreed on the changes to the mandate and did not sign the new agreement.²³

While Uzbekistan is usually ambivalent toward other states, especially in security issues, the government has demonstrated some willingness to negotiate. In 1997, Karimov proposed and created the now largely forgotten Six-plus-Two group in response to the civil war in Afghanistan. It



An exhibit at the State Museum of the History of Uzbekistan, Tashkent. The exhibit title reads "Uzbekistan: The International War Against Terrorism."

included all states bordering Afghanistan (China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) plus the United States and Russia. The UN Security Council backed the declaration in 1999, officially known as the Declaration on Fundamental Principles for a Peaceful Settlement of the Conflict in Afghanistan. Its goals include not providing weapons or military support to any group in Afghanistan. Six-plus-Two was supposed to create a dialogue between members of the declaration and all factions in Afghanistan, so that the conflict would be resolved through negotiation and not military means.²⁴ A few meetings that included all members and representatives from the Northern Alliance and Taliban were held in Tashkent.²⁵ Six-plus-Two effectively stopped activities following the 9/11 attacks in the United States.

The idea of the group reemerged in 2008 as Six-plus-Three, to include all the previous members with the addition of NATO. Karimov revitalized the idea during the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest.²⁶ However, the group is still only a proposal. Russia did not support Six-plus-Three in 2008; it believed NATO involvement gave the United States too much influence and that Afghanistan should be included in the group as a full partner, not just as a participant in a dialogue.²⁷ While Six-plus-Three is not likely to become a reality, the government of Uzbekistan is thinking about its role in the future of Afghanistan and not strictly in defensive terms against the IMU. The government of Uzbekistan has proven that it will take action outside of U.S., Russian, or other influence to protect itself and maintain stability.

The IMU in Recent Years

By 2001, the IMU had a base in Afghanistan, reportedly maintained one in Tajikistan, and had also established a relationship with the Taliban (against the Northern Alliance) and Al-Qaeda. Equally important is that at some point in its existence the IMU became involved in drug trafficking and continues to be.²⁸ Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan changed the dynamics of the IMU in 2001. Namangani was killed in November 2001, along with a number of IMU combatants, ostensibly leaving Yuldashev in command. There have, however, been conflicting reports on the circumstances of Namangani's death, and even some reports that he is still alive.²⁹ While Namangani

Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan changed the dynamics of the IMU in 2001.

never took a public relations role in the organization, the IMU has not had the same level of success that it did during the 1999 and 2000 incursions. This is a likely result of a lack of experienced commanders.

In late 2001 and early 2002, Operation Enduring Freedom forced the IMU to move into South Waziristan, in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, where it operated from 2002 to 2009. It appeared to have broken apart during these years, but regrouped and periodically clashed with Pakistan's security forces, causing a backlash against Uzbeks from Waziristan tribes that bore the brunt of Pakistan's reaction.³⁰ A drone attack killed Yuldashev in August 2009, even though the IMU waited a year before officially announcing his death. His apparent successor is Usmon Odil, about whom little information is available.³¹ The IMU probably maintains some ties with the Taliban, even a subordinate position to them. Yuldashev took an oath of allegiance to Mullah Omar; Usmon Odil has probably done the same or taken an oath to another Taliban leader. Ultimately, this will include the IMU in the future of Afghanistan in some form.³²

The changes to the IMU also make it difficult to determine the current number of combatants or their origins or the organization's capabilities. The IMU has posted a number of photos and videos on their website, and, while it is mostly propaganda, there is some useful information. The website has a list of martyrs from 2009 (listed as the Islamic year 1430) and they appear to be a mix of ages and ethnicities, mostly from Central Asia, but also some from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and even Turkey.³³ The list of martyrs from 2010 (1431) is similar.³⁴ The most recent list of martyrs shows a large number of fighters from the northern provinces of Afghanistan and a few from Uzbekistan.³⁵ Videos posted to the website as recently as November 2011 are in several languages—Uzbek, Russian, English, German, and Urdu—and show some attacks the organization



A mullah delivers a sermon before prayer at a mosque in the Uzbek border town of Termez, near Afghanistan, 19 October 2001. (AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky)

carried out. Some of these videos are also posted on YouTube.³⁶

The IMU appears to be trying to reach a broad base, but the website is written in Uzbek with the Cyrillic alphabet. This suggests that the organization continues to address and recruit from the population in Uzbekistan. In any case, the government could have a strong reaction if its citizens join the IMU and are involved in future action against the state. Even if the IMU is now predominantly made up of fighters from Afghanistan, there could be an equally harsh reaction if the government of Uzbekistan perceives its counterparts in Afghanistan (at the national or provincial level) are not doing enough to maintain security.

Considerations

Looking at the government of Uzbekistan's view of security does not mean ignoring or dismissing the human rights versus security assistance debate.³⁷ Rather, it draws attention to Uzbekistan's involvement in the future of Afghanistan outside these other issues. During the coming drawdown of United States and NATO forces in Afghanistan, it is realistic to expect that the IMU will somehow be involved in Afghanistan, despite its changes in leadership, operational focus, and capabilities.

Given Uzbekistan's history of conflict, the government will be cautious and likely hostile to the IMU's involvement and intent. There are a couple of possibilities to consider after the drawdown.

First, the IMU remains in Afghanistan and turns its attention to attacks on Uzbekistan, because of fundamentalist beliefs or criminal activities related to drug trafficking. If this happens the government of Uzbekistan would take defensive and possibly offensive measures. As a defensive measure, the government would most likely close or restrict movement on the border, hindering economic ties with Afghanistan. As an offensive measure, it could conduct a cross-border strike against the IMU. While a unilateral strike would be internationally and regionally condemned, Uzbekistan did this during the Batken incursions, and it might happen again.

Another possibility is that the IMU remains in Afghanistan but, because of the organization's changes, does not carry out any attacks against Uzbekistan. In this scenario, the IMU could be a part of a ruling structure in Afghanistan because of its connections with the Taliban. If this happens, the government of Uzbekistan would have a strained relationship with the government of Afghanistan or whatever local government structure emerges in the future. Uzbekistan still views the IMU as a terrorist organization. If citizens of Uzbekistan are involved with the IMU (or the Taliban) it would complicate any political ties, regardless of the proposal for dialogue like the Six plus Three group. Uzbekistan could refuse to participate in economic development projects like the New Silk Road if it believes the IMU is associated with it.

Uzbekistan's government will take whatever action it believes is necessary to maintain stability and protect the state. Any debate on the justification of these actions could go on indefinitely. Ultimately, Uzbekistan is a regional power and will be involved in Afghanistan's future. Looking at the government of Uzbekistan's viewpoint of regional security and what action it might take to maintain it will help create awareness of the possible outcomes in the region following the U.S. and NATO drawdown and eventual withdrawal. **MR**

NOTES

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37. Andrew Strohlein, "Why Uzbekistan matters," CNN Global Public Square, 18 October 2011, <<http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/18/why-uzbekistan-matters/>> (21 October 2011).